

Fungus creeps into state alfalfa fields

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there and we don't know how long we've had the disease," Leath said.

Verticillium wilt, which resembles fusarium wilt and anthracnose, interferes with water movement throughout the plant said Leath. The plant leaflets wither and turn brown followed by stem dehydration. Eventually the fungus invades the crown and kills the plant.

The recent discoveries showed up in 1978 seedings. He explained the disease worsens in the second and third year of the stand.

"Farmers will probably take the field out in three years rather than five or six," Leath said.

"We didn't expect to find it because we're too far south."

Leath explained the fungus, native to Europe, is usually found in cooler climates and was probably brought to this country in seed.

The disease was first discovered in the U.S. in 1977. Idaho, Washington and Oregon, seed producing states, were the first to report alfalfa damage. Wisconsin and New York crops were affected last year.

Since the outbreak in the western states, plant breeders have been working on resistant varieties.

"About every commercial company we've got has something coming," he said.

Although the same fungus exists now in both Europe and the U.S., the big difference, said Leath, is the stage of the disease.

In Europe the fungus produces spores on the outside of alfalfa on stems and can be easily carried in the wind or rain producing a contagious situation.

"To date in the U.S. we have not observed that happening," Leath explained.

Instead, the present stage of the disease found within the stem and roots in the state crops would move slowly or creep along within a field.

Meanwhile, the summer is almost over and most of the crop has either been baled or ensiled. But John Baylor, extension forage agronomist explained that feeding the crop will not be a problem.

"There is very little evidence that diseases in general on forage, would harm animals consuming

it," said Baylor.

"The economical loss," he said, "is in the field."

The most effective control measure, said Leath, is to get resistant varieties out as fast as possible.

Because hay moves at the state and national level, quarantine would not be feasible.

The USDA will, however, recommend machinery sanitation, a similar control measure for anthracnose.

USDA representatives are expected to survey the northern part of the state next week, said Leath.

"We're not sure what we're going to have yet but it looks like we're ahead of it."



Verticillium wilt will interfere with water movement in a healthy alfalfa plant, left, and cause withering and eventually death as depicted by infected plant, right.

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